

Luke 1:57-80

We've all heard the phrase, "Christmas in July." This year it may actually seem quite possible because here we are, the last Sunday in June, and we have the Advent preacher, John the Baptist before us, as well as Scripture readings from the Advent season in the church. But don't decorate your tree or send out your Christmas cards just yet. This isn't Advent. It's the Nativity of John the Baptist which is always celebrated on June 24. We have white paraments hanging in the church instead of green, not because we're anticipating Christmas, but because John's Nativity is a special festival on the Church Year calendar.

Come to think of it, John the Baptist is all over the Church Year calendar. In Advent we encounter him, sometimes twice. He shows up in January at the Baptism of our Lord. Today, June 24, is his Nativity, and August 29 is the Martyrdom of John the Baptist. John the Baptist is connected to five days in the Church Year. That's nearly ten-percent of all the Sundays of the year dedicated to him. The only Biblical figure who has more Sundays than John is Jesus. And that we can understand. But why John? Why does he get so much attention, so much honor?

Moses was a great prophet in the Old Testament, but his day is September 4. Elijah and Elisha also get just one day each in the Church Year. Even the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob each have their one day. But then John the Baptist comes along and we give him five. Now granted, his birth was pretty amazing. His parents were old, well past the age of child-bearing. But so were Abraham and Sarah, and their son, Isaac, doesn't receive all the attention John gets. John's father, Zechariah, was unable to speak from the time John was conceived until the time he was born. But that was his fault, hardly something to honor John over.

We need to pay particular attention to what Zechariah says about John when he is finally able to speak again. He begins by blessing God on account of the Savior who would be born. And then he speaks to his 8-day old son, "*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways.*" He continues, but I will stop with that. There was nothing special about John in his own right. He was a sinner like you and me. Even as a prophet, he was like all the other prophets. They were called by God and they spoke His words. All the prophets came before the Lord. Not a single prophet followed Jesus. All were sent before Him. The difference, however, is that all the prophets except John came long before the Christ. For hundreds of years, not one single prophet was sent. There was a long delay between Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and all the rest, before John appeared. And when John appeared, the Savior was following on his heels, for John was preparing His way. No more delays. No more waiting. When John came, Jesus' feet were already at the door.

It's like a wedding processional. Bridesmaid after bridesmaid come up the aisle, but everyone knows the bride is not coming yet. But when the maid of honor walks up the aisle, everyone turns to look because the bride is coming right behind her. John is that maid of honor. All the other bridesmaids are selected with care by the bride. She does not just randomly pick girls she knows. She has a special relationship with each of her bridesmaids. But her maid of honor is the most special of all. The maid of honor is her dearest friend or her sister. The maid of honor receives the greatest honor of all the bridesmaids not because of anything about her, but because of who she is in connection to the bride. If there was no bride for some strange reason; if all the bridesmaids came up and the maid of honor came up as well, but there was no bride in the back to follow, the maid would have no honor. The people in the pews would call the entire affair a waste of their time and go home. The maid of honor receives her honor only because of the bride. And so with John. He is honored by the church, rightly

so, even more than all the other prophets, because he is closest to Jesus. Even Jesus says of him, *“Among those born of women, there is no one greater than John.”*

So where do we come in? We come in 2,000 years later. If we were part of that wedding processional, we would be the distant cousins out tying cans to the back of the car. There’s no honor in that. We do not have a day in the Church Year with our name on it, and we never will. But wait a minute...John’s honor comes from Jesus. Because of his closeness to Him, John is honored by the church. And that is how God honors His children today. We who were once separate from Christ have been brought near to Him through His blood. In Holy Baptism you are, like John, brought close to Jesus. In the Lord’s Supper you come up the aisle because your Lord calls you up to be where He is, to be intimate with Him, to receive the greatest honor of all--His body and blood given for you for the forgiveness of your sins.

There is no honor apart from Jesus. To foolish Christians who do not stay close to their Lord, as well as to all who were never Christians, Jesus will say, *“I never knew you; depart from Me.”* Satan knows this, and this is why he is always driving us away from the Lord. It doesn’t matter what our excuse is to keep us away from the faithful hearing of the Word and the receiving of the Sacrament. He just wants to make sure that we have an excuse, and that we use it regularly. And our sinful flesh is only too happy to oblige him. We prefer the honor heaped on us by the world to being honored by God. We’d rather be with our friends than with our Lord. But *“anyone who loves the world,”* writes the Apostle John, *“Does not have God’s love in him.”*

You can’t have it both ways. John is honored by God, but the world hated him. They cut off his head. And yet John still speaks today, or rather, God speaks through him. And through John, God is calling you to repentance. Do not excuse your sins; repent of them. Repent because you have a Savior. You have a merciful God who forgives. You have a Lord who walked up the hill to a cross. He received no honor from the world. They despised Him. They beat Him. They crucified Him. They wanted nothing to do with Jesus. But here today, Jesus wants everything to do with you. He already bore your sins. He already took your punishment. Now, today, He is here to forgive you. For every time in life when you have dishonored Him, for seeking the world’s honor over His, for every excuse you have given, He forgives you. Jesus does not forgive you so that you honor Him. He does not covet your praise and thanks. He forgives you because He is merciful.

He has no mercy for those who are good, and holy, and righteous. He only forgives sinners. He is gracious only to those who have offended Him by their sinful living, who have gone their own way apart from Him. If this is you; if this is what you confess, then John the Baptist is pointing you today to Christ. He is calling out to you, *“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world...who takes your sin away.”* And then I have the joy of telling you, not to depart from Christ, but to *“depart in peace.”* Like John, you are the maid of honor not because of anything you have done, but because wherever you walk, wherever you go, your Savior, who sees you as precious to Him, who calls you loved and forgiven, your Savior goes with you. Amen.